

HOW CAN CUSTOMER SERVICE BE INCREASED IN THE FIRE AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES?

Advanced Leadership Issues in Emergency Medical Services

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An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy
as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program

December 1997

ABSTRACT

The problem that this research paper discussed was that there is a need in the fire and emergency medical services to provide a greater level of customer service so that personnel and service will not be lost to private providers.

The main purpose of this research paper was to identify the role of customer service in today's fire and emergency medical services and identify different ideas that could enhance the level of customer service perceived by the public.

A descriptive research method was chosen for this project in order to identify the role of customer service and how the fire and emergency medical services could enhance their delivery of customer service. This research method was used in order to identify the answers to the following research questions. These questions were developed during class discussions in Advanced Leadership Issues in Emergency Medical Services at The National Fire Academy. These questions were:

1. What is the past and present perception of customer service as it relates to the fire and emergency medical services?
2. What is the importance of an organizational mission statement in the delivery of customer service?
3. What are some of the programs available to help an organization increase its delivery of customer service?
4. In dealing with emergency medical services and medical treatment, what is the importance of emotional treatment?

The procedures for completing this research paper consisted of a literature review of magazine articles from the Learning Center at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland. The

procedures also involved a survey that was sent to students in the Fire Science Program at the Collin County Community College in McKinney, TX. The students represented a cross section of most of all the departments in my area of Texas.

The results of this reserach paper explained how to enhance customer perception, the importance of a mission statement, different programs available to increase customer service, and the importance of emotional treatment when dealing with the customer.

Some recommendations for dealing with the present and past perception of customer service included training personnel and administrators on proper management techniques that are used by private sector organizations. Some recommendations dealing with the question of the importance of a mission statement included spending time and resources in developing a written mission statement and making sure that this mission statement is known by all in the organizations. This mission statement should be used during the budget process, training process, and during employee evaluations. Some recommendations dealing with the question of programs available to help organizations increase customer service included the use of surveys after the organization has been in contact with the customer during both emergency and nonemergency calls. An awards and incentive program should be started that rewards the employee for doing a good job. Making customer service training a part of the recruitment training process is another good program for increasing an organization's customer service. Recommendations for addressing emotional treatment included creation of an occupant assistance sector. This sector would listen to the victim involved, find out what agencies would be able to help them, and contact them for the victim.

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INTRODUCTION

We have all seen the downsizing or rightsizing that has gone on within corporate America. This concept has caused many companies to take a long and hard look on how they meet the needs of a demanding customer. The fire and emergency medical services may have not gone through such a severe downsizing, but many have had positions left unfilled due to the perception of taxpayers and city governments. Whether the topic is corporate or public, the customer requires more attention today than at any other time in our history.

The problem that this research paper will discuss is that there is a need in the fire and emergency medical services to provide a greater level of customer service so that personnel and service will not be lost to private providers.

The main purpose of this research paper is to identify the role of customer service in today's fire and emergency medical services and identify different ideas that can be used to enhance the level of customer service perceived by the public.

A descriptive research method was chosen for this project in order to identify the role of customer service and how the fire and emergency medical services should enhance their delivery of customer service. This research method is used in order to identify the answers to the following research questions. These questions were developed during class discussions in Advanced Leadership Issues in Emergency Medical Services at The National Fire Academy. These questions are:

1. What is the past and present preception of customer service as it relates to the fire and emergency medical services?
2. What is the importance of an organizational mission statement in the delivery of customer service?

3. What are some of the programs available to help an organization increase its delivery of customer service?
4. In dealing with emergency medical services and medical treatment, what is the importance of emotional treatment?

BACKGROUND & SIGNIFICANCE

The background of the ideal of customer service is generally focused on corporate America. In private industry, businesses often provided a service that was also offered by other businesses. Both providers would be in competition with one another and the one that offered the best service to the customer would generally do the most business and would profit the most. The fire and emergency medical services are generally public funded and have no competition on the public level. Thus, fire departments as well as emergency medical providers conducted their services with no thought of any competition taking their service away. The fire and emergency medical services were deeply embedded with tradition and usually thought that customer service was when they responded on calls, put out fires, or transported patients to the hospital.

This background information sets the stage for the overall problem of this research paper. There is a need in the fire service to provide a greater level of customer service so that personnel and service will not be lost to private providers.

This author began as Chief of the Farmersville Volunteer Fire Department in January of 1994. The department consists of thirty five members and responds to approximately 200 calls per year. These calls include both fire and first responder calls. We do not transport patients, but respond with a private ambulance company on many medical calls, major accidents, and as needed. In the past,

customer service was really not a concern because we are an all volunteer organization. The thought of customer service was precluded by the fact that many of us left our jobs, or whatever we were doing, and responded when the alarm sounded. This past record of customer service and the department's lack of concern of it has possibly resulted in less money in our budgets over the years. In 1995 and 1996, the department took cuts in our budget that could have been prevented if we provided a higher level of customer service. The public may have been more concerned for our loss of money and may have voiced their opinion to council members. I strongly feel that the loss of budget money was a direct result of our lack of concern for the customer, or our citizens.

This author is also employed with the McKinney Fire Department as a Captain. The past impact on this organization has been a positive one. This organization has provided a very good level of customer service. These services included a very progressive public education program, a fire safety inspection program for local business, and advanced life support services with paramedics. The past impact of this type of customer service has resulted in new stations, additional personnel, and salary increases. The customer has been very satisfied with our service in the past.

The present impact of insufficient customer service could disrupt the future in both organizations. Loss of personnel is a very real concern due to possible programs such as managed health care and the very real threat of private industry taking over certain aspects of our service. These private companies market themselves to the public emphasizing their ability to provide very good customer service. They also have the ability to statistically back up what they say, while the fire and emergency medical services are set in tradition. The present impact of this traditional view by the fire and emergency medical services sets the stage for failure.

There is sufficient evidence to justify a study of the impact of insufficient customer service. The evidence is simply that there are some cities who have chosen to lose their fire service or their

emergency medical service to private providers. In some cases, some cities have chosen to replace both of these services. The marketing plans of these private providers have convinced these cities that they can do the job cheaper, better, and obtain a higher level of customer service and customer satisfaction. It is of the utmost importance that the fire and emergency medical services begin to market themselves and capitalize on the ideal of providing high levels of customer service in order to keep personnel and to keep these private companies from getting footholds in their cities.

In August of 1997, I attended Advanced Leadership Issues in Emergency Medical Services at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland. This course provided many different perspectives in leadership issues. Some of these issues included marketing and providing higher levels of customer service in order to advert takeovers by private companies. During this course, I came to realize that if the fire and emergency medical service is to continue to exist by public funding, we must realize the threat of privatization and questions ourselves about what service we provide and who are our customers. These customers, who can be external or internal to the organization, demand and should receive high levels of customer service.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to answer each of the original research questions, many magazine articles were reviewed. These articles gave insights from those who have published works in the area of customer service.

The first article reviewed was “Customer Service and Triage”, by Thom A. Mayer, MD. This article relates customer service to sensitivity. The author explained that although there are many institutions turning out emergency personnel, there are few that teach the concept of customer service.

The article goes on to note that many patients complain due to the lack of sensitivity and customer service that they receive (Mayer, June-1997).

This portion of the article aided the research project by giving the idea that patients relate customer service to emotional support or “bedside manners”.

This article also gave a good definition of who the customer can be when fire and emergency medical services are involved. The customer is anyone who is impacted by either our processes or our products (Mayer, June-1997).

This statement aided the research paper in that it gave a very good and simple definition of who is our customer. Understanding that the customer is anyone in which we contact or observes us during our treatment of patients, should make an organization very aware of its actions.

The next article reviewed was “Customer Service: Making It Work”, by Robin F. Paulsgrove. This article gave an interesting observation concerning mission or strategy statements. The article explained that the philosophy of the entire department should be clear with the management personnel and they must interpret this mission or strategy to the rest of the organization (Paulsgrove, September-1991).

This portion of the article aided the research paper by explaining how a mission statement should be viewed by the top brass and communicated to the rest of the organization so that each member will know the level expected of them when they are performing their jobs in the field.

The article also gave examples of programs that would help increase the level of customer service in an organization. One such program included the entire city and all of its departments. This program taught ways of obtaining customer feedback and developing creative managers. This program was focused on executives and midlevel managers (Paulsgrove, September-1991).

The concept of providing this type of city wide training focused the research paper on the importance of educating the organization so that it can prepare itself to give a high level of customer service and keep this level in the future.

Another program that this article discussed was the use of surveys. These surveys were aimed at the employees in order for management to get an idea what needed to be done internally to increase the perception of customer service. The surveys identified salaries, training, and a concern about community recognition for their service (Paulsgrove, September-1991).

The concept of an internal survey influenced the paper by identifying yet another type of program that can be used by the organization to gain support for maintaining customer service. It provided a way for management to gain the knowledge of what their members need both physically and emotionally in order to provide their customers with a high level of customer service.

The next article reviewed was “Customer Service Includes Grief Support”, by Michael Boyl. This article explained that there are many providers that are now allowed to pronounce people dead in the field. This action can often times leave a family emotionally charged and filled with confusion and anxiety. It is of the utmost importance to manage these situations and understand that care needs to be extended to family members of the patient on an emotional basis (Boyl, February-1996).

The article also talked about a telephone survey that was done in Orange County, California. This survey determined the number of fire officers that had to provide information or grief support to families following a death and ranked how comfortable these fire officers were at providing this information. The end result after reviewing the data was that these officers needed grief support training and that a grief support handbook would be justified (Boyl, February-1996).

This article aided the research project by providing information that concluded that emotional treatment can be as important as physical treatment under certain situations. The article also stressed the

importance of training on emotional treatment so that fire officers and firefighters were comfortable when dealing with emotionally distressed people.

The literature review also included another article by Robin Paulsgrove. This article was “Understanding Customer Service Methodology”. This article stated that it is very appropriate for departments to reevaluate their mission statements. Departments should ask certain questions of themselves when dealing with their mission statement. These questions may include whether or not the mission is still valid, if customers are identified, and whether or not a service baseline has been established. A well developed mission statement can reinforce the departments public service commitment (Paulsgrove, April-1991).

This portion of the article provided the research paper with an ideal of the importance of an organizational mission statement in delivering a good level of customer service. It also provided information that concluded that once a mission statement is developed, it should be reexamined from time to time in order to make changes.

The article also discussed different ways of evaluating customer perceptions. Customer service perceptions are often developed during short term encounters. Some of these encounters are not controllable. However, meaningful customer perception information can be gathered through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and surveys. This information can also be used to evaluate employee perceptions of customer service. The article also placed a high emphasis on recruitment. Employees who have both technical and interpersonal skills will greatly increase department customer perception and customer service. Another portion of this article stressed the importance of recognition and reinforcing employees. If employees are recognized and rewarded for customer service achievements, the program will be more successful. (Paulsgrove, April-1991).

This portion of the article aided the research project by identifying different ways of developing programs, such as focus groups, surveys, and reward programs that would help the organization increase their delivery of customer service.

The next article reviewed was “Public Safety: How To Maintain A Customer Service Attitude in Your Communication Center”, by Kevin Willett. This article considered customer service from a dispatching perspective. A shared vision of customer service must be present in 911 dispatch centers. Unfortunately, dispatchers take “control” of calls. This control often times includes speaking with high volume and rudeness. Instead, these calltakers should provide them with their name and show a real concern for helping the caller. In other words, a relationship should exist between the caller and the calltaker. These calltakers must be trained in these interpersonal skills (Willett, May-1997).

The article also explained the importance of recognition. This recognition includes posting citizen compliments in a central location that all employees will see. Newsletters can also be distributed on a timely basis that includes these compliments as well as information of customer service that will aid all employees (Willett, May-1997).

Public relations also plays an important role in developing the perception of customer service. One good way of providing public relations is to have a “hang-up program”. This may include a letter to the household where the call originated, or a special visit by a fire or emergency medical worker. This visit would include information on how to use 911 and the importance of using it only in an emergency. A similar program was set up by the author that made 911 hang-ups go down and customer appreciation go up (Willett, May-1997).

This article aided the research paper by providing different programs that can be used when dealing with customer service and 911 dispatchers. The use of training 911 dispatchers in interpersonal dynamics is important when identifying different programs that can be used to increase customer service.

The program of following up on 911 hang-ups is also a good example of a program that increases customer service.

Another literary work reviewed was “In The Race To Improve Customer Service”, by Sara Crumpacker. This article was about disaster assistance and the emotions of the people who have lost property and possessions. Some of the applicants for assistance wanted to tell their story to someone instead of receiving quicker checks and more money (Crumpacker, July-1995). Many disaster victims were given a survey with a written section in it to express their opinions. These victims noted that within the first two weeks, they needed someone to talk to about their emergency. This need to express their feelings continued for the next two years after the occurrence (Crumpacker, July-1995). Another interesting fact was that most of the people wanted to be told what to expect regarding their assistance. They wanted to be told exactly what was to happen, even if it was not what they desired (Crumpacker, July-1995).

This article was important to the research paper because of the importance of considering the emotional treatment that was necessary after emergency incidents. As fire and emergency medical workers, we must understand that treatment goes beyond the physical and into the emotional areas.

The next article reviewed was “Customer Service: A New Concept in the Fire Service”, by Francis X. Holt. This article explained the psychological concept of customer service as it relates to the fire and emergency medical services. This concept is known as cognitive dissonance. Many people interpret this as being nice and polite to people when an incident is occurring, then saying what you really believe and want to say in private. There are no positives in this type of behavior (Holt, August-1997).

This part of the article aided the research paper by identifying the way many emergency workers feel about the people in which they deal with while doing their jobs. The job is very stressful

and can add up inside a person through many years of service. This accumulation may effect the emergency worker in a negative way.

The article also described the importance of a mission statement. All members of an organization must be aware of the purpose of its mission statement. The members should also work towards fulfilling the mission statement and not slip into the “us and them” attitude (Holt, August-1997).

This last portion of the article helped the research identify the importance of a mission statement and the importance of all members working towards its goal. Customer service can be negatively effected if the mission statement is ignored by the organization.

Another article reviewed was “Implementing A Customer Service Program”, by Jeffery S. Smith. This article explained the role of customer service in the fire and emergency medical services over the years. According to the article, customer service has always existed in the fire service and always will (Smith, August-1997). This so-called customer service has largely been the perception that if the customer needs us, they will call. If they call, we will provide the service (Smith, August-1997). The article then discussed the fact that this type of customer service is over and done. Our customers now include a large number of professional people, single parents, and increasing numbers of immigrants. We can no longer sit around the station and only go out when we are called. This is largely due to people no longer standing for government waste (Smith, August-1997).

This portion of the article effected the research paper in that it describes the role of customer service in the past and what will be expected in the future. If the fire service is to remain in business in the future, customer service will decide whether or not private industry will be considered a competitor.

The article also discussed different programs that enhance customer service. The article explains that every department should have a customer relations or customer service program. These programs should include provisions for training all department members involved and a real set of

objectives to be met (Smith, August-1997). Training should include the proper way to answer and talk to the general public, appropriate dress, apparatus and station appearance, and how to deal with complaints (Smith, August-1997). These training topics should also be used during employee evaluations after they have spent some time practicing their skills (Smith, August-1997).

This part of the article aided the research paper in the area of describing specific programs that an organization can develop and implement in order to increase their delivery of customer service.

The next article reviewed was “Department of Customer Service”, by Michael E. Vonada. In this article, the author explains that the fire and emergency medical services are in competition with not only private organizations, but other city departments as well. This competition is over tightly managed budgets with each department trying for certain parts of it (Vonada, December-1990). The article also explained that the market should be divided into two groups. These groups are the city council and staff that represent internal market and all other customers represent the external market (Vonada, December-1990). Another point made by this article was that fire and emergency medical services could improve their financial situations by running their departments like a business (Vonada, December-1990).

This part of the article effected the research project by identifying how customer service relates to the fire and emergency medical services. The article described who our customer really are and how we should address both the internal and external customer.

The next part of this article described a program that can be used to help increase customer service. The Union City Fire Department often provides its members with specialized training in various fields. They invited other city departments to attend the training, at a cost (Vonada, December-1990).

This portion of the article effected the research paper by describing a program that can be used to increase customer service that is related to internal customers inside the same city. This type of

program can well benefit the department when trying to gain funds that other city departments are also trying to attain.

The next article reviewed was “Customer Service Above and Beyond”, by Donna Daly. This article explained that customer service techniques are just as important as IV’s, splinting, and patient assessment. Customer service techniques have to be taught just like treatment techniques (Daly, August-1992). Although medical treatment may seem routine to the emergency worker, it is not routine for the patient and each patient should be treated as a valued customer (Daly, August-1992). The article also defined customer service as answering the question of what can be done beyond medical care and will it make a difference to the patient (Daly, August-1992).

This was a good article that effected the emotional treatment section of the research paper. We must realize that good treatment goes well beyond the physical treatment. Emotional treatment may include an actual real concern for a patient’s feelings and making the patient feel as though they are the most important thing in the world.

The next article reviewed was “A Safety Net for Seniors”, by Keith Bowermaster. This article discussed a program called Elder-links. This program’s purpose was to provide a safety net for older residents who are vulnerable to abuse or neglect. These people were repeatedly calling 911 (Bowermaster, August-1996). Although this program was not designed for elderly people who were being abused, it was designed for those people who were vulnerable and for those people who needed services beyond what the fire and police services could provide (Bowermaster, August-1996). One important point of the program that relates to customer service is that the fire and emergency medical service has the opportunity to make a positive difference by connecting these people with the proper services (Bowermaster, August-1996).

The portion of the research paper that this article effected had to deal with identifying what kinds of programs are available to increase delivery and customer service. The article provided an important possible program that the fire and emergency medical service can do for the elderly.

Another article that was reviewed was “Customer Service: Staying the Course”, by Randy Templeton. This article discussed the relationship between customer service and emergency services. The text explained that the toughest concept to accept is that it is the customer, not the provider, that constitutes good customer service (Templeton, August-1996). People want to see the fire and emergency medical service workers out in the public and not just waiting in the station. This preference by the public means that we must do different things or the same things in different manners (Templeton, August-1996). The article also discussed that customers define customer service by determining reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding, and by tangibles (Templeton, August-1996).

This part of the article effected the research paper by further defining how customer service relates to the fire and emergency medical services. The article gave a good analysis of what customers feel constitutes good customer service and described what characteristics organizations must possess in order to be seen as providing a good level of customer service.

The article also gave input on programs that can be used to enhance customer service. The article explained that customer service, as a program, with a beginning and end does not work. Programs and initiatives don’t work. We have to fundamentally change who we are and how we view the world (Templeton, August-1996). Special rewards and recognition were also discussed for employees to enhance their delivery of customer service. These rewards can not be valid unless there is a clearly defined criteria for achieving them (Templeton, August-1996).

This part of the article helped the research paper gain insight on different types of programs available to increase perceived customer service. The article provided information on keeping a customer service program in development all of the time with no end. It also provided information on developing a reward and recognition program for employees.

The last article reviewed was “The Gospel According to Phoenix”, by Scott Baltic. This article contained excerpts from Alan Brunacini’s book, “Essentials of Fire Department Customer Service”. One of the most home-hitting statements in this article dealt with dealing with the emotions of our customers during a tragedy. The article explained that often times, we have left people standing beside the road with their burned vehicle, left a family sitting across the street from what was left of their house, or a grief stricken family looking at a loved one with a sheet over their head (Baltic, August- 1996). We in the fire and emergency services must approach our customer’s events in a way that considers a full range of the needs that come with that situation (Baltic, August-1996).

This article summed up the emotional needs of our customers during and after their tragedies. The article directly effected the research paper by identifying different situations that may cause the customer to demand different types of services that aid their emotions and not their physical needs.

PROCEDURES

This research project was completed by utilizing a literature review that took place at the Learning Center at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland. The information was gathered during August 1997 when attending the Advanced Leadership Issues in Emergency Medical Services course.

The magazine articles chosen for this research project were focused at different aspects of customer service. These aspects include how customer service relates to the fire and emergency medical service, how an organizational mission statement effects customer service, programs available to enhance customer service, and the emotional needs of our customers.

In addition to the literature review, a survey on customer service was developed. This survey was given to 35 students at the Collin County Community College in McKinney, TX. These students represented a cross section of all the departments in my area of the state. These departments range from being small to large and paid to volunteer. These students, who are all enrolled in an Associates of Applied Science degree program, are employed by these fire departments and have varying backgrounds and specialties. The survey (see Appendix A) was in a two part format. The first part asked simple organizational information and questioned the survey taker about their organization's level of customer service. The second part questioned the survey taker about the level of customer service through all phases of a call. These phases included dispatch, response, on scene, transport, turnover, and post care. Each question was a simple yes or no answer to find out about the level of customer service in their organizations.

The results of the survey as well as the results of the literature review were then tabulated and a bar chart was made for each question. The chart consisted of the number of respondents and their answers to each question.

Limitations

There are two limitations that should be pointed out concerning the completion of this research paper. This first limitation relates to the public sector provider. There is an enormous amount of information on customer service when dealing with the private sector provider. However, the public

sector provider has not had much experience with customer service. In order to relate customer service to the public, many suggestions are taken from what has worked well with the private sector. The second limitation relates to volunteer organizations. Most of the survey participants are paid firefighters, but a small percentage deal with the public on a volunteer level. Many of the suggestions on customer service relate to the paid fire service and not directly to the volunteer service. However, it should be understood that most of the principles of customer service can still be applied in either situation.

Definitions

The following are definitions of terms that are taken from different ideas on customer service. It should be noted that these definitions are used for this research paper exclusively and could have other meanings when used under different situations.

Privatization - owned or controlled by a group or person rather than by the public or government.

Mission Statement - a written organizational statement that documents an organization's goals, assignments, or tasks to be carried out.

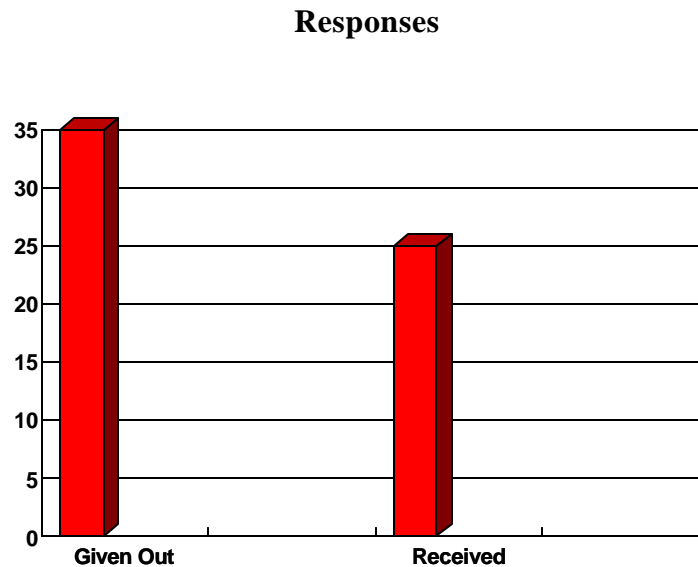
Cognitive dissonance - doing or saying what is expected in the public's eye, but saying or doing what you believe while in private.

Tangibles - capable of being appreciated or realized mainly by the sense of touch.

RESULTS

Each of the original research questions dealing with customer service will be answered by using information that was gained through the literature review and the survey that was sent to various fire science college classes at the Collin County Community College.

The following chart shows that there were 35 surveys that were given out and 25 that were returned. The information that follows will deal with answering the original research questions.



What is the past and present perception of customer service and its relation to the fire and emergency medical services?

Customer service in the fire and emergency services must first be defined. According to Mayer (June-1994), the customer is anyone who is impacted by either our processes or our product. This customer can also be someone who observes our work and forms an opinion on our work's credibility and level.

The past history of customer service in the fire and emergency medical services shows that customer service has always existed in the fire service and always will. Smith (August-1997) explains that this level of customer service has largely been the idea that if the customer needs us, they will call and all we had to do was wait for them to call. Over the years, the population has changed into a more diversified group. For example, our customers now include single parents, professional people, and

increasing numbers of immigrants. The population as a whole will no longer stand for government waste. Waiting at the station for a call is government waste. In addition, Vonada (December-1990) wrote that the present perception of customer service in the fire and emergency medical services will also determine who keeps providing the service in the future. As taxpayers struggle to limit the taxes put upon them, government will be forced to streamline and privatize certain departments. If the fire and emergency medical services are to remain the sole provider, they must improve their financial situations and run their departments much like any other business would run their business.

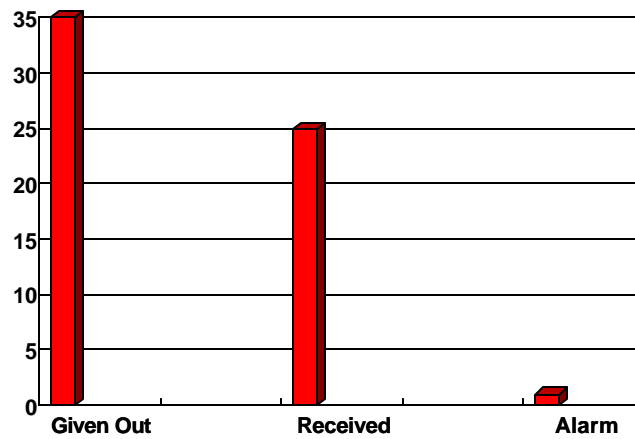
Another point to consider in describing the present perception of customer service is to identify what factors the customer sees as customer services. Templeton (August-1997) explained these factors to include reliability, responsiveness, competence and credibility.

The customer often defines their perception when they contact the fire and emergency medical services. This contact includes the timely manner of 911 contact, condition of responding units, and the conduct of personnel on the scene. The following charts deal with the survey sent out to the Fire Science classes at the Collin County Community College.. This survey asked the student to think back to their last few alarms and consider the following questions:

1. Was the call dispatched in a timely manner?
2. Did units have a clean and professional?
3. Did the crews move briskly or slowly?

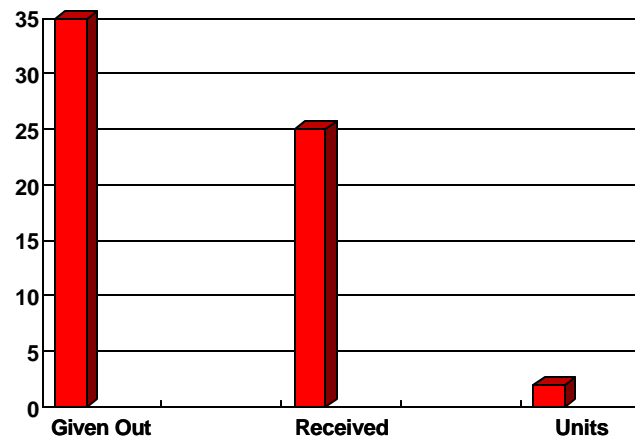
The following chart explains that there were 35 surveys given out and 25 were received. Of those 25, there was 1 that considered the alarm office was doing a substandard job.

Substandard Alarm



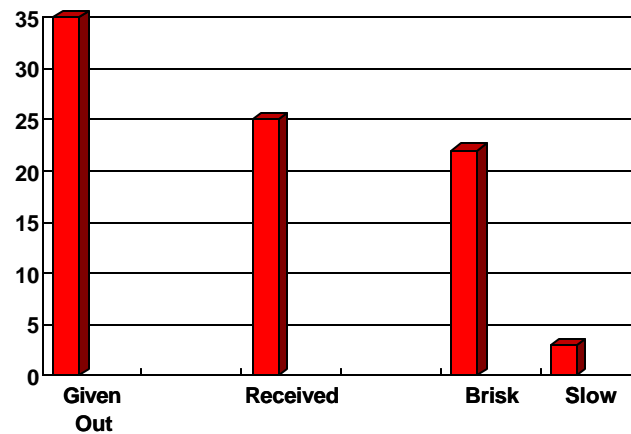
The next chart explains that there were 35 surveys given out and 25 received. Of those 25, there were 2 that considered their units not to be clean and professional in its appearance.

Unprofessional Appearance of Units



The last chart explains that there were 35 surveys given out and 25 that were received. Of that 25, there were 22 that said their crews moved briskly and 3 that said their crews moved slowly.

Crews: Brisk vs. Slow



In summary, the perception of customer service can be based on the past and the present situation of the fire and emergency medical services. Even though departments are faced with budget restraints and taxpayer scrutiny, customer service can best be managed where the customer contacts our personnel on calls. Simple things such as clean units and friendly attitudes can make or break a department.

What is the importance of an organizational mission statement in the delivery of customer service?

The overall mission statement of an organization directly impacts the level of customer service that that organization will be able to provide. Paulsgrove (September-1991) explained that the philosophy of an entire department should be clear with the management personnel and they must interpret this mission to the rest of the organization.

It would also be appropriate for organizations that have missions statements to re-evaluate them. According to Paulsgrove (April-1991), departments should ask certain questions of themselves

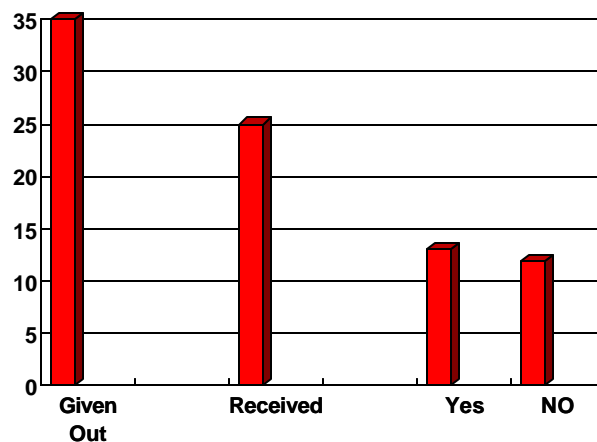
when dealing with their mission statement. The author also adds that this mission statement should identify the customers and establish a public service baseline.

Another point given by Holt (August-1997) was that many emergency workers get the “us and them” attitude. The author explains that all members must be aware of the purpose of its mission statement and work towards fulfilling that mission statement.

In summary, a mission statement must be known by all of its members and the entire organization should work towards filling those goals set by the mission statement. This statement should be re-evaluated from time to time to make sure that the customer and customer needs are identified.

Some departments do not have formal mission statements that are written down and known by all of its members. The survey given to the Fire Science classes at the Collin County Community College addressed this very question. The following chart depicts that there were 35 survey given out and 25 that were received. Of those 25, there were 12 organizations that did not have known mission statements and 13 that did have mission statements.

Organizations Having Mission Statement



What are some programs available to help an organization increase its delivery of customer service?

One of the best programs that an organization can use to gain the perception of customer service by the customer is the use of surveys. According to Paulsgrove (September-1991), surveys provide management a way to gain knowledge of what their members need both physically and emotionally in order to provide their customers with a high level of customer service.

In addition, Paulsgrove (April-1991) wrote that customer service perceptions are often developed during short term encounters. Customer perception can be gained through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Paulsgrove (April-1991) also explained that recognition and reinforcement are important programs to our employees because if these employees are rewarded for their achievements, the program will be more successful.

Another program mentioned by Willet (May-1997) included a recognition program consisting of newsletters sent to employees with different topic on customer service. One particular program mentioned by Willet (May-1997) was a “hang up” program. This program consisted of sending an employee out to a residence when a hang up 911 call was made. This employee would provide customer information to the caller concerning the proper way to use 911 and what type of situations 911 should be called. According to Willet (May-1997), his department set up a similar program that caused 911 hang ups to go down and customer appreciation go up.

Other programs include training programs for department members on customer relations and customer service. Smith (August-1997) wrote that these programs should include clear objectives and the proper way to answer and talk to the public, appropriate dress, apparatus and station appearance, and how to deal with complaints. This training program should also become a part of the employees evaluation system.

Bowermaster (August-1996) described a program that involved the elderly. The program was called Elder-links. The program was developed to provide a safety net for senior citizens who are vulnerable to abuse or neglect and was developed due to the increased calls to 911 by these people. Bowermaster (August-1996) wrote that this program was designed for people who were vulnerable and needed service beyond the scope of the fire and emergency medical services. The fire and emergency medical services was given the opportunity to connect these people with the correct agencies that could help them, thus increasing customer service.

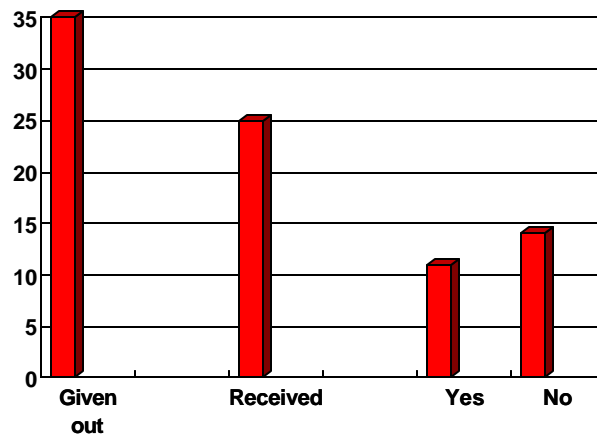
According to Templeton (August-1996), a customer service program has a beginning but not an end. It is a constant ongoing process. Templeton (August-1996) explained that the fire and emergency medical services must change who they are and how they view the world.

In summary, a customer service program is not an all inclusive program. Several different types of programs can be used to increase customer service. These programs include 911 hang up programs, and elderly assistance programs. In addition, programs such as employee training, employee recognition, and employee rewards will all aid in increasing an organization's level of customer service.

The following charts deal with elderly assistance, use of surveys, customer service training, and reward programs. The results are from the survey given to Fire Science students at the Collin County Community College on each of these areas.

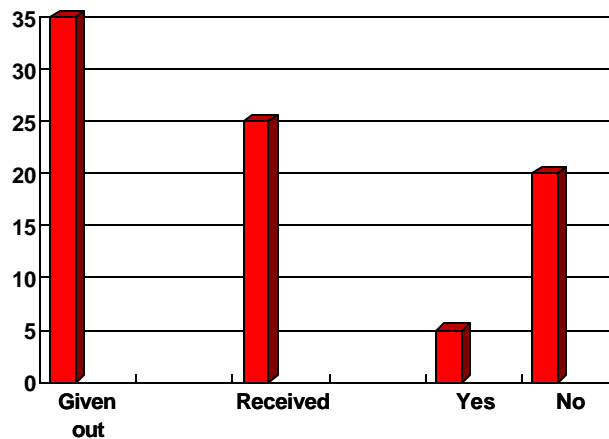
The following chart explains that 35 surveys were given out and 25 were received. Of those 25, 11 provided customer service programs to the elderly and 14 did not. These programs included blood pressure checks, public safety education, and fire drills.

Provides Services For Elderly



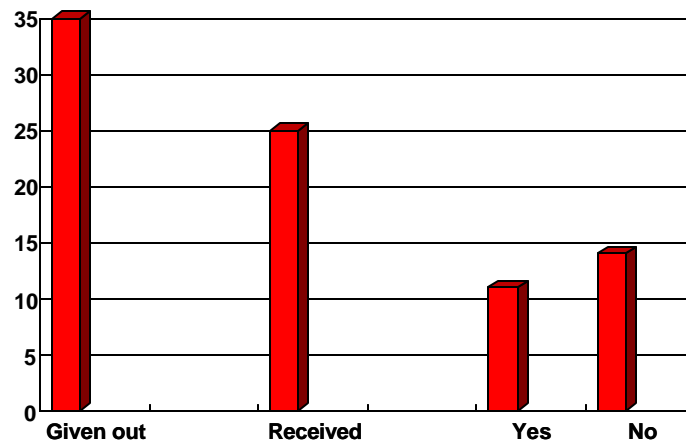
The next chart dealing with surveys explains that there were 35 surveys given out and 25 that were received. Of those 25, only 5 used surveys and 20 did not use surveys.

Use of Surveys



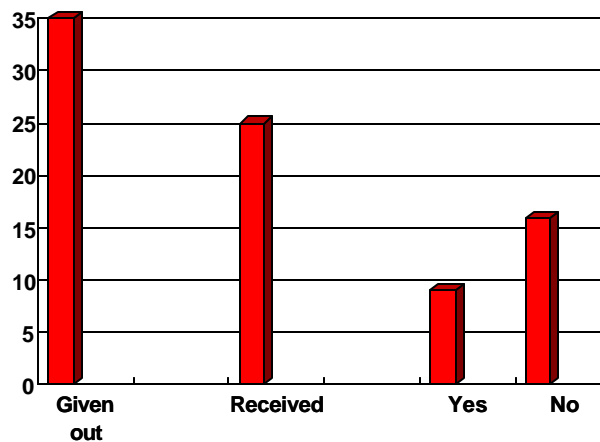
The next chart deals with customer service training. The chart explains that 35 surveys were given out and 25 were received. Of those 25, 11 did train in the area of customer service and 14 did not train in customer service.

Provided Training In Customer Service



The last chart deals with rewards and recognition. The chart explains that 35 surveys were given out and 25 were received. Of those 25, 9 had reward programs and 16 did not have reward programs. These reward programs included awards, medals, and merit raises.

Provided Reward and Recognition Programs



In dealing with emergency medical services and medical treatment, what is the importance of emotional treatment?

According to Mayer (June-1997), there are many institutions turning out emergency personnel, but few teach the concept of customer service. This lack of knowledge makes many patients complain about the sensitivity and customer service they receive.

Another important part of emotional support includes grief support. Boyl (February-1996), explains that families are often confused and emotionally charged when dealing with the death or injury of a family member. In these situations, emotional treatment may be as important as physical treatment. Fire and emergency medical works must be well trained and informed on the management of these situations.

Emergency workers must always be willing to listen to the victims of emergencies and disasters. For example, Crumpacker (July-1995) explained that during disaster situations, some people who needed assistance simply wanted to tell their stories to someone instead of receiving quicker checks. It should also be pointed out that most disaster victims, when surveyed, sighted that within the first two weeks following a disaster, they simply needed someone to talk to about what had happened. According to Crumpacker (July-1995), most people wanted to be told exactly what was to happen even if the results were undesirable.

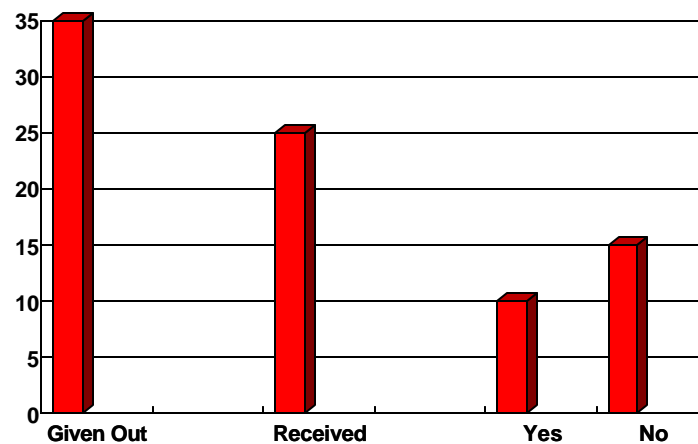
Another viewpoint by Daly (August-1992), is to always be concerned about what can be done beyond medical treatment and making a difference to the patient. We must realize that good treatment goes beyond physical treatment. Emotional treatment may include a real concern for a patient's feelings and making them feel as though they are the most important thing in the world.

Baltic (August-1996) wrote that that we in the fire and emergency medical services must approach our customer's events in a way that considers a full range of the needs that come with that situation. There are many situations that place a demand on different types of services that aid emotional needs as well as physical needs.

In summary, emotional needs can often times need treatment much like physical needs. These emotional needs may include the willingness of workers to simply listen to problems, treating people as though they are very important to the worker, and putting effected people in contact with the appropriate agency to aid them.

The survey given to Fire Science students at the Collin County Community College surveyed how many departments represented by each student gave grief support to its customers. The following chart explains that there were 35 surveys given out and 25 received. Of those 25, 10 gave some sort of grief support while 15 gave no grief support at all.

Grief Support Given



DISCUSSION

It is important to understand the relationship between the study results and the findings of others. This comparison consists of the findings from the literature review compared with the survey sent to the Fire Science students at the Collin County Community College. Each comparison will include implications to the Farmersville Volunteer Fire Department where this author is the volunteer Fire Chief. Each comparison will also include implications to the McKinney Fire Department where this author is employed as a Captain.

In discussion of the question pertaining to the past and present perception of customer service and its relation to the fire and emergency medical services, the findings of others was that the customer is anyone in which we contact. Other findings included that customer service has always been a part of the emergency services, whether we knew it or not. The customer would simply call and we would respond. Customers perceive our service level by our reliability, competency, and credibility. Customers mainly judge some of these traits by our response times, appearance of our units, and by the actions of our personnel. In comparison, the survey of the Fire Science students indicated that most of the participants felt as though their level of customer service was sufficient because of their response times, appearance of units, and the actions of their people on calls. The response times were good with only one indicating that response time was too long. In addition, the appearance of units was also a positive indicator because there were only two who felt that their units were substandard. The actions of personnel was slightly alarming. Of those surveyed, three thought that crews did not move briskly when performing their work.

My own interpretation of the study concerning the first question was that the customer judges the merits of an emergency service in many different ways. The time of response, unit appearance, and actions of personnel are all something that can be managed and controlled. All of these topics can be

addressed in one way or another and can easily turn the customer's idea of a department to a very positive one.

The study results concerning perception of the customer service does have some organizational implications to the Farmersville Volunteer Fire Department as well as the McKinney Fire Department. Each of the departments depend upon municipal budget money to fund their departments and if the level of customer service is low, then we could be heading for hard times when budgeting for new apparatus, improved equipment, and more personnel. Another implication is that low customer service sets the stage for private ambulance companies or private fire services to take over operations simply on the fact that they may provide better customer service at a cheaper price.

The second question dealt with the importance of an organizational mission statement in the delivery of customer service. The findings of others showed that the philosophy of an entire department depends upon the clear interpretation of the organization's mission statement. Another finding concerning mission statements is that once they are written, they should be evaluated from time to time and corrected and improved. In comparison, the results of the survey showed that there were many departments that did not have written mission statements which meant that they had no clear cut goals in which to guide them in the delivery of customer service.

My own interpretation of study results concerning this question was that there are probably many departments that need to take a real hard look at what they do and how they do it. They need to implement mission statements and train their personnel on how to accomplish their mission to a level that the customer will be satisfied.

The organizational implications to the Farmersville Volunteer Fire Department is simple. We need to develop a mission statement and make it known to all of its members. The mission statement should be used to justify anything that we need to budget for or improve upon. If we do not develop

such a mission statement and continue business as usual, we could be severely jeopardizing the organizations at the customer's expense. The McKinney Fire Department does have a mission statement and it used throughout the budget process and the daily activities that we perform. McKinney is a rapidly growing city and it important for the organization to continue to keep itself focused on its main objective. Our customers are increasing and we must increase our service right along with them.

The third question dealt with different programs available that would possibly increase customer service levels. The findings from others in the literature review revealed that there were several of these types of programs. These findings suggested that surveys can be used to get a main idea of the customers perception of the organization's service. In addition to surveys, questionnaires and focus groups could also be used. Another important program that was found was the use of recognition and reward programs for employees. It should be noted that in any program, training is an important factor for each employee. This training should also be used during the evaluation of any employee. Other than simple EMS care, organizations can help people by putting them in contact with proper agencies that handle abuse, insurance needs, or any other service beyond the scope of and fire or emergency medical service.

The survey given to the Collin County Community College students dealt with the surveys or questionnaires mentioned above. These students were asked if their departments used surveys in any way. This author was very surprised at the results. Only five departments represented by the group surveyed their customers. In addition, only eleven did training on customer service, only eleven provided any programs for the elderly, and only nine gave any rewards or recognition to employees..

My own interpretation of the results of this question was that many departments are not doing enough customer contact after the initial call to find out what their level of perceived service was to that customer. There are many programs that could benefit these organizations at a relatively low cost.

The implications to both the Farmersville Volunteer Fire Department and the McKinney Fire Department are simple. Each organizations has the possibility of losing budget money as a result of a low level of customer service. Our populations have become more dependent on services from us and we must meet their expectations. If not, we could be replaced by private organizations that really focus on the customer and customer service.

The last question discussed dealt with the importance of emotional treatment. The findings of others explained that many emergency workers are being trained by many schools, but few of these school teach anything about sensitivity and customer service. One important emotional treatment is grief support. This emotional treatment benefits family members following a fire or emergency medical call. We as emergency workers must learn to listen to these people who have had emergencies or disasters. Other findings showed that in many situations, treatment must go beyond physical treatment and we must learn to appreciate patient's feelings and concerns.

In comparison, the findings from the survey given to the Collin County Community College students revealed that only ten departments represented gave any sort of emotional treatment to their patients.

My own interpretation of the results from this question are that many departments simply make their calls and deal with patients as an incident number with no feeling or concern for their emotions. The only concern that most departments have are to treat the patient with the proper medical protocol and "get cleared" for the next call. Then, the cycle begins again. This is evident by the small amount of departments in the survey that give any emotional treatment.

The implications to the Farmersville Volunteer Fire Department and the McKinney Fire Department are essentially the same. Both departments will suffer if we do not begin to treat the patient's emotions. The continued treatment of the patient as an incident number will only create low

customer service and again gives both departments the threat of privatization by those who are willing to provide this type of treatment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section will provide recommendations that will be broken down to address each of the original research questions.

Some recommendations for dealing with the present and past perception of customer service include training personnel and administrators on proper management techniques that are used by private sector organizations. These types of techniques will enable fire and emergency medical services run their organizations much like a business.

One important recommendation that will have a positive impact on customer perception is to take a real hard look at the dispatch service of an organization. These dispatchers must be precise as well as polite when talking to people on emergency 911. They must be well trained in sending the proper units in a timely manner.

One last recommendation that will enhance the customer's perception deals with burnout. Often times, fire and emergency personnel have responded to high volumes of calls over a several year period. The result is often irritable and aggressive personnel. One way to prevent this burnout is to frequently reassign these people to districts that are not as busy. This rotation will provide some time for these personnel to get a new perspective on their job. Another recommendation to prevent burnout would be to have frequent critical incident stress debriefings and allow these personnel to talk about their frustrations.

Some recommendations dealing with the question of the importance of a mission statement include the following. Organizations should spend time and resources in developing a written mission statement and make sure that this mission statement is known by all in the organizations. This mission statement should be used during the budget process, training process, and during employee evaluations. An additional recommendation in dealing with mission statements would be for an organization to reevaluate their mission statement at least twice a year to make sure that the organization and all in the organization are heading down the right path.

Some recommendations dealing with the question of programs available to help organizations increase customer service include the following. One important recommendation is to survey the customers after the organization has been in contact with them during both emergency and nonemergency calls. These surveys can then be analyzed and used to correct anything that the organization is doing that inhibits customer service.

Another recommendation dealing with customer service programs deals with the employees. An awards and incentive program should be started that rewards the employee for doing a good job. This employee would come to work with a much better view of his job and would make a better contact with the public.

Making customer service training a part of the recruitment training process is another good program for increasing an organization's customer service. These new employees should be trained and placed in the stations with a strong idea of customer service and know what they can do to enhance the department's image to the public. Another program that can be used is training in the subject of "change". Departments should understand that change is taking place all the time and the whole character of the organization should be open to and welcome change.

The last recommendations deal with emotional treatment. Emotional treatment is beginning to be recognized as being an important part of a patient's entire treatment process. On the fire ground, emotional treatment can essentially be helping the occupant deal with the loss of all of their possessions. During such situations, it is recommended that an occupant assistance sector be established to aid either the patient, homeowner, or business owner. This sector would listen to the victim involved, find out what agencies would be able to help them, and contact them for the victim. These contacts may include family members, insurance agents, contractors, and other agencies that could assist in relieving the pain of a fire or medical incident in one's life.

In conclusion, it is up to each organization and jurisdiction to make sure that we can compete with privatization. This privatization will certainly be a factor in the future. The taxpayer will always be looking for ways to save money, no matter what department is involved. The perception of the general public or our customers will greatly effect the way the taxpayer deals with the fire and emergency medical service. The extra time and training that we take to make a positive relationship with these taxpayers could someday save our jobs.

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APPENDIX A

Customer Service in Fire and EMS

This survey has been developed to aid in the completion of an applied research project for the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy. Please answer the following questions that pertain to customer service in the area of fire and emergency medical services.

Part I

Organizational Information

What type of department are you a member?

☐ Volunteer ☐ Career ☐ Combination

How many members are in your department? _____

Does your department do EMS?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Customer Service Information

Does your department have a mission statement that is known by all of its members?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does your department provide grief support for its customers?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does your department provide any special services for the elderly other than EMS?

☐ Yes ☐ No If so, what? _____

Does your department do surveys that are used to check the public's perception of your delivery of service?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does your department do any training in the area of customer service?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does your department provide any rewards or incentives for providing exceptional service?

☐ Yes ☐ No If so, what? _____

Part II

In conclusion of this simple survey, please think back to the last few alarms in which you have responded. Please answer each of the following questions as truthfully as you can regarding your level of customer service.

Dispatch: Was your call dispatched in a timely manner with no complaints of response times by the caller upon your arrival?
___Yes ___No

Responding: Did your units have a clean and professional appearance with the department logo clearly visible?
___Yes ___No

On-scene: Did the crew move briskly or sluggishly?
___Briskly ___Sluggishly

Transport (If applicable) When medically appropriate, did the crew members engage the patient in meaningful conversation?
___Yes ___No

Turnover: (If applicable) Did a crew member show a family member where to provide additional information to the hospital?
___Yes ___No

Post Care: Did a crew member ask a family member if there was anything else that they could do or anything else they needed?
___Yes ___No

Thank you for completing this survey. The information will be used to generate answers to specific questions in the research paper. After completion, the end product will be available at the Learning Resource Center at the National Fire Academy located in Emmitsburg, Maryland.